

"Mr. Keats (if that be his real name)..."

By Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

Many years ago I found among my father's books a volume of Macaulay's essays. Over the ensuing weeks and months, I read those essays that interested me most. More than five decades have passed since then, but the essay that stands out in my memory is not one of the more famous ones, but a review with the innocuous title, "Mr. Robert Montgomery" involving two books of Mr. Montgomery's poetry. Well before Macaulay had finished with him, not many pieces of the hapless Mr. Montgomery remained for anyone to pick up and put together again. The review crackled and scintillated with remarks like:

His writing bears the same relation to poetry which a Turkey carpet bears to a picture.

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It is too much that this patchwork...tawdry frippery, is to be picked off the dunghill on which it ought to rot, and to be help up for admiration...

And so on, on and on.

Macaulay's essay was written in 1830, occasioned by the eleventh and second editions respectively of the two books of Montgomery that he reviewed. Early during the onslaught, he blamed the publishers for what he called "puffing" worthless works. In modern times, he said,

Men of letters have...ceased to court individuals, and have begun to court the public. They formerly used flattery. They now use puffing...It is no excuse for an author that the praises of journalists are procured by money or influence of his publishers, and not by his own.

I was too young to understand fully all the nice points of language and diction and plagiarism made by Macaulay against Robert Montgomery, but I did immediately learn three things from his review. One, that it was quite civilized for a reviewer to mercilessly pulverize an author. Two, it was clear even to my inexperienced eye that at a time and in a society where Coleridge and Keats and Shelley and Wordsworth were active, Robert Montgomery's poems had no right to go through eleven editions. Three, had Macaulay been in our time, he would not have written the review, or in fact any review, because now authors and publishers routinely "court the public", and Macaulay would have been shocked into speechlessness by the "puffing" that most authors claim and receive as a matter of right. Things certainly

differ from culture to culture, but the task of the reviewer more often than not seems now to consist of venting personal prejudices, subject of course to political correctness. Some reviewers avoid the pitfall by writing more or less independent essays on the subject of the book under review. In my language (Urdu) matters are somewhat simpler: a review is almost always an unpaid advertisement for the author.

I often wondered if Macaulay's guns silenced Montgomery forever. I later saw only one, very casual, reference to him. But our own English courses at pre-B.A. level in our time continued to be stuffed full with mediocrities like Henry Newbolt, Felicia Hemans, Richard Watson Dixon, Edwin Arnold and many more who I hope, are now entirely forgotten. Macaulay's review may have choked Montgomery, but his clan, it seemed, continued to thrive. What Auden said of poetry was certainly true of poetry reviewing: it makes nothing happen.

This brings me to the case of Keats. We, as young students of English, were led to believe (not least through Shelley's *Adonais*) that the Quarterly Review's scathing notice (1818) of Keats's *Endymion* killed him off prematurely. Doubtless, the Quarterly Review treated the young Keats with an icy contempt that should have made the young poet's blood run cold. "Mr. Keats (if that be his real name, for we almost doubt that any man in his senses would put his real name to such a rhapsody)" is how the second paragraph of the review begins, after informing us in the first that the work was unreadable, even though the reviewer made "efforts, almost as superhuman as the story appears to be, to get through it." The reason for its unreadability was that Keats "is unhappily the disciple of a new school of what somewhere has been called Cockney poetry" whose main characteristic was that it consisted of "the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language".

The review must have hurt: it hurts even today. But one doesn't need hindsight to see the wielder of the staff is short on good sense and has a tinny ear. More importantly, he has no acquaintance with English poetry as written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But the review doesn't seem to have occasioned a course correction of any significance in Keats's poetic career. He matured fast, and summed up his own graduation to self-discipline in a memorable phrase. His mind, he said, "was like a pack of scattered cards---I am picked up and sorted to a pip." He wrote elsewhere that "praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty makes him a severe critic of his works." Eliot put it well when he said, "to hearken to criticism is to invite paralysis." We know that Eliot himself had been a recipient of mindless criticisms no less harsh, in early twentieth century

terms, than what was meted out to Keats in early nineteenth. And while Keats was mauled and lacerated by an anonymous reviewer, Eliot was pounded at by sensitive poets like Charles Williams who should have known better. Williams opened his essay on T. S. Eliot with the following ill-tempered observation:

In some former existence, among the myths of Greece, Mr. Eliot was probably a gadfly. Or perhaps, since no one knows either his own true shape or that of any other being or thing, perhaps he is now;...but it is not the gadfly that drove Io across seas and lands, but rather one that stings us into a maze;...There is a clue to this maze, but we shall never know it, for the humming of the gadfly is unmeaning.

The anonymous reviewer of Keats had precisely the same complaint: Keats's poem didn't convey any meaning to him. No damage seems to have happened to Eliot because of Charles Williams, as also because of many others like him. My point is that creative writers don't, and shouldn't, as a rule give a damn. If the review is favourable, it gives a moment of satisfaction. If not, it may give an instant of satisfaction. But a creative writer can't any more improve himself through a review than a singer can improve by reading treatises on music.

I have been writing poetry for a long time now, and have always found myself resistant to advice and instructions from my reviewers. I have been writing reviews too for a long time and don't recall a single instance of a poet or fiction writer actually taking note of and benefiting from my counsel. Once I reviewed a collection of poems by a friend of mine (now dead, regrettably). I said that his poetic vision was not enough embedded in metaphor. My friend promptly wrote a long rejoinder asserting that he had nothing to do with metaphor because metaphor had nothing to do with poetry.

In my younger days I wrote very severe reviews on books by well-established and much older poets like Sardar Jafri (1913-2000), Makhdum Muhyiuddin (1908-1969), and Sikandar Ali Vajid (1914-1983). There were reactions and responses from the readers, but the basic literary issues addressed in the reviews remained largely untouched. I reviewed a historical novel by Qazi Abdus Sattar (1933-), and said, among other things, that the historical details of the novel were not accurate. A number of my readers took offence and claimed that the history was the strongest part of the novel, but other issues raised by me were never engaged with.

Perhaps the most ineffectual review that I ever wrote was in English, on Khushwant Singh's English translation of two Urdu poems by Iqbal. I demonstrated, to my satisfaction at least, that the translation was faulty in almost every possible way. The book has since run into thirteen or fourteen editions, without the translator

having paid heed to any of my points. A few years later I wrote a somewhat similar review of David Matthews' more elaborate translations of Iqbal. May that book also meet with the same happy fate.

And this, I think, is as it should be. We reviewers are like the mosquito which believes that cows were given horns so that mosquitoes may land on them and hitch a free ride. Charles Williams, as we saw above, described T. S. Eliot as a gadfly. Nothing happened to Eliot because of that gadfly-ish remark, except that Eliot went on his way and continued to prosper and even befriended and supported Williams in his literary career.

In Urdu reviewing, the general though inarticulate major convention is that a review is a statement of friendship—or enmity. This may sound excessive, but works well in practice. In fact, it is not unknown for the reviewer or the author practically buying the space in a magazine for printing a favourable review. Thus reviews are read for the little factual information that they contain, but largely for keeping oneself abreast of who is currying whose favour, or who is twisting the knife into whom.

To be sure, there have been learned, largely impartial and well-researched reviews too. Among the modern examples, A.A. Surur (1911-2002), Mahmud Ayaz (1929-1997), Rashid Hasan Khan (1925-2006), Qazi Abdul Wadud (1896-1984), Mushiq Khvajah (1935-2005), Gian Chand (1923-2007), and Sham Lal Kalra (1937-1999) come to mind. But they were all scholarly reviewers, and even then, it's not possible to say the reviews written by Qazi Abdul Wadud, Rashid Hasan Khan and Sham Lal Kalra were entire free of malicious arrogance. They, however, didn't take sides, nor did they cut any slack for senior or powerful literary figures.

Reviews of poetry and fiction tend to be bland, occasionally effusive, and sometimes abusive. Here again, the author's position in the material world—how much favour he can grant to the reviewer—plays a decisive role. Books by potential "favour-granting" authors are always treated respectfully, if not obsequiously.

Authors frequently solicit reviews from the influential or the popular. They sometimes write the review themselves and request some friend to lend his name to it. Yet in my experience, reviews rarely if at all promote or retard the sale of a book. In Urdu, the literary community and the reading community often interpenetrate. Almost everyone knows exactly how much everyone else is worth. Reviewing is a game that is played seriously, exactly like a game.